



From the senses to the world

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A child's education must nurture capacities that make up facets of a full, rich human experience – and art education must do no less. What art can bring to education is the ability to intensely inhabit one's body and one's environment, to use the senses and foster a lively and honest connection with the world. Clearly, art education is not supplementary to the educational endeavour but integral to it.

The purpose of art education at the school level is not to make artists of students, nor is it primarily to train students in particular skills. Of course, much has been written about how art classes help improve hand-eye coordination, fine motor skills, or spatial understanding. Depending on the specifics of the art education curriculum, it can and will develop various skills that help students learn

other subjects. But what is it that gives art education its deeper more fundamental value? What makes it more than a set of auxiliary activities scaffolding the learning of other subjects? Why does a neglected art education translate to a neglected education?

The answer may lie in looking more closely at the 'art' in art education. We might bravely venture to ask: What is art? But E.H. Gombrich in his classic, *The Story of Art* writes, 'There really is no such thing as Art. There are only artists.' This sounds, at best, counter-intuitive – if art does not exist, isn't the idea of the artist meaningless? But it isn't. An artist is not a creator of art the way a baker is a maker of bread. This is partly because it is not nearly as easy to say whether or not something is art, as it is to know a loaf of bread. Art is simply what an artist does – it is the result of being an artist.

Who, then, is an artist? An artist is concerned with truth and beauty, with originality and relatedness. Being an artist means responding to life and to the world in a way that is not utilitarian. An artist is usually someone who feels compelled to live their life exploring an intangible connection between themselves and the world – and they spend most of their time attempting to give a voice to this pursuit. But the voice they find is not as important as the nature of the pursuit. One may paint a picture, sing a song, or grow a garden, but it is in the vision and the process that the art lies.

Whether or not a student decides to become an artist in this sense is immaterial. However, connecting with the world in an honest, original, non-utilitarian way – with the senses truly alive – is hardly optional. This implies having a

mind that does not have to reduce life to words and second-hand images to try to make sense of it. It implies a listening of silence, and beautiful action. It implies the capacity to be genuinely moved by the world.

It is this significant responsibility that I believe art education must shoulder, and it can do this by borrowing elements of the artistic impulse and the artistic process. Though it is not easy to take apart this process, we can identify some of its fundamental components – the material, the senses, and the exploration or play.

Play is a seamless amalgam of curiosity, humour, adventure, and intense presence. Children engage in play naturally, but quickly seem to lose it growing up. One of the central premises to my work as a teacher was that if the artistic process involves a kind of dance between the artist and the muse, there is a second equally important dance taking place between the artist and the material, with the senses as interface. The material or medium inevitably shapes the process and the product, and one may say that every material has its limitations. But artists accept their chosen material as a partner

and collaborator in the creative process. They play along with the material's nature, with all its idiosyncrasies – and challenge it at the same time – so that the word 'limitation' is meaningless. Another wonderful thing the art-making process provokes is an expansion of what we normally consider the boundaries of our body and our self. For a few unguarded moments our materials and tools are undeniably a part of our body – and our work, though staring at us from the outside, is as intimately within us as a thought.

While higher art education must train students in the skilful use of various materials and tools, the first step at the school level is to create in the young student a rich feeling for the world around them. Primary art education as I see it should invite them to commune with the tangible world, particularly that of nature, through touch, gesture, smell, sight, even sound. Most of my students were privileged urban children who rode through the city each day to school, and I felt it was especially important for their art education to counter the frenzy of their precocious lives. It helped that the small school was located on a tiny island of green in the city's outskirts.



This context became the catalyst in my experiments. Rather than imagination as fantasy and expression as self-affirmation, I would focus on awareness and observation, connection and responsiveness. The environment with its trees, rocks, soil and grass, would be not only the backdrop, but an active resource. I learned from watching the kids' spontaneous activities, extended them consciously, and put them into various contexts. Thus there emerged a series of activities that the students came to call 'nature art'.

These activities encouraged children to spend time with the natural material around them, and to see, touch, feel and listen closely. Sometimes this would be through making something, at other times not. The product was never emphasized but the act of connecting with the material was. Sometimes I would ask the children to go on little collecting trips, bringing back things to match a description; sometimes there would be a hunt for different sorts of things that could yield colour on paper – seeds, leaves, soil, twigs. Collected material might be used to make assemblages or it might simply be observed and arranged by various criteria. Beyond obvious visual criteria like size, shape and colour, I would invite the students to connect with the sticks, stones, berries or leaves through their texture, weight and moistness or dryness, among other things. Sometimes a nature art class would simply be a rambling walk to try and notice smells, or changes of temperature on the skin.

One of my favourite nature art activities is an extremely simple one. I ask children to pile stones one over another to make a tower as high as possible; I suggest to the 7 to 10 year olds to try making

towers as tall as themselves. The children must choose and place their stones with great care. The shape and texture of each stone is important, as is its relative position in the tower. But I don't have to give these instructions; the children learn everything they need to know simply by doing the task. Nature is the teacher, and suddenly the students are listening – with their eyes, their hands, their skin, their bodies. I have done this exercise with groups of students 6 to 15 years old, and I am always delighted to see the joyful perseverance with which they build and re-build their towers for a solid couple of hours in almost complete silence.

This exercise necessitates a slowing down. It forces one to meet the material and cooperate with it. Stubbornness doesn't work and cleverness is not enough; one must embody the right attitude, the right kind of touch. Without imposing moral judgement, work like this reflects the kind of energy one brings to it: impatience and heavy-handedness simply tumble the tower, and one must begin again. In a world where some very influential human beings are dominating the natural world to terrifying consequences, I am inclined to believe that such small gestures of cooperation with nature to create something harmonious may be significant, particularly as symbols to children who are about to inhabit the same world.

My classes with teenagers, while introducing more conscious skills and principles like perspective, volume and composition, rather became opportunities to address the psyche. Attitudes like 'I can't draw', 'Art is not for me', or 'This just won't come out right!' typically begin to set in during the pre-teen years. There are endless possibilities for exercises

that shake up habits and loosen biases. Simple gestures like using unfamiliar materials, switching to the other hand, drawing without lines, and blind contour-drawing never fail to surprise students with their own work. Always, my emphasis was on the act of seeing, and on pushing the boundaries of the basic capabilities that everyone already had.

Art activities, like mathematics, sport or anything else, have great potential to create and reinforce psychological complexes when led unintelligently. A mindful art education, however, has the tremendous power not only to counter these blocks, but to help the student meet future challenges differently. As learners and teachers we often find that the unravelling of one knot can disentangle the thread in more than one place. This challenge has always stimulated me as a teacher.

There is a deep joy embedded within the process of art, even in its simplest form. It is easy for a child to touch this, and this is why students really respond to these activities. Apart from anything else an art education will achieve for the future, it can bring students in touch with a primal fulfilment in the present moment. A teacher with a broad and empathetic understanding of art therefore has the opportunity to open up students to the world in uncomplicated but deep ways.

